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Veterans in Burlington County and nationwide are applauding regulation changes by the federal Department of Veterans Affairs that will make it easier for veterans to file claims for post-traumatic stress disorder.

The new rules, which went into effect last week and apply to veterans of all eras, scrap requirements that veterans applying for PTSD benefits provide proof such as incident reports or witness statements that demonstrate their condition is related to a specific incident that occurred during their period of service.

Obtaining those documents could be difficult for many veterans and often slowed the claims process or resulted in veterans being denied benefits.

Under the new rules, veterans need provide only testimony that they served in a war zone, not necessarily in combat, and were in a position to be exposed to hostile military or terrorist attacks. The rules also require a diagnosis of PTSD by a Veterans Administration psychiatrist.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a medically recognized anxiety disorder that can develop from seeing or experiencing an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury to which a person responds with intense fear, helplessness and horror. It is common among war veterans.

Symptoms include lack of emotion, temper and flashbacks.

More than 400,000 veterans receive compensation benefits connected to the disorder, and VA officials expect the changes will help speed the processing of new claims. They also said veterans previously denied benefits under the old rules can reapply.

"This nation has a solemn obligation to the men and women who have honorably served this country and suffer from the often devastating emotional wounds of war," Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shineski said in a statement. "This final regulation goes a long way to ensure that veterans receive the benefits and services they need."

Walt Tafe, director of the Burlington County Department of Military and Veterans Services, said the old VA rules related to the disorder were among the most difficult of the VA's policies to navigate and often required years of waiting for veterans to receive the benefits to which they were legally entitled.

Advertisement "We had cases that took four or five years to process," Tafe said. "There would be guys who would absolutely be suffering, but were dismissed because they couldn't remember a date. That's a pretty bitter pill to swallow."

He said the new rules appear to be more manageable but are not "overly easy."

"(Veterans) still have to have a diagnosis from a VA doctor. That's very important," Tafe said.

Paul Tuliano Sr., a Pemberton Township resident who served in the U.S. Army Air Corps and Air Force during World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam War, agreed that the changes in regulations are long overdue.

"It's about time," said Tuliano, a frequent advocate for veterans in the county. "The amount of justification and documentation that was previously needed dragged things out and made it really difficult. In a lot of cases, (PTSD) didn't even manifest until long after they left the service."

Another Burlington County veteran, who asked not to be identified, said the changes would help veterans obtain the services and benefits they deserve.

"It doesn't matter whether you're a clerk or a truck driver or on the front with a rifle every day,"

the veteran said. "When you're in a war zone, nobody comes home the same."

U.S. Rep. John Adler, who serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, likewise cheered the VA's decision.

"The men and women of our armed forces put their lives on the line to keep our country safe and free," Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, said in a statement. "They deserve better than a claims process which asks for records that could be impossible to find. Finally, the VA got this one right."